



## **Reviving “the Houston Planning Approach”**

**Carroll G. Robinson, Esq.\***

### **The Current Challenge: Uncoordinated Plans**

In planning and community development circles, the biggest criticism of Houston is that it is the largest city in America without zoning. While that is true, the lack of zoning however is not Houston’s biggest planning problem.

The real planning problem in Houston is that we have too much uncoordinated planning.

In Houston, there are a lot of public and private sector plans that will impact the future physical and economic growth and development of the city and its quality of life (as well as that of the region); but there is not enough coordination of all the plans.

Even with all the planning going on in Houston there is still not enough early and sustained public input into public plans and their implementation.

Houston has a Planning Department, a Planning Commission and now a newly created Parking Commission. However, there is no one entity in the city currently tasked with the responsibility of publicly evaluating and educating the community on the holistic impact of all the existing public and private sector plans on the future growth and development of Houston and the region. (H-GAC is a repository for plan but is not an evaluator of the holistic impact of plans beyond evaluating the cumulative impact of transportation construction projects on the region’s compliance with federal clean air standards.)

The City’s Housing and Community Development Department funds housing and economic development projects but does not evaluate the impact of the projects it funds on traffic patterns and traffic congestion or the need for, or loss of, green and open spaces.

The Public Works Department and Mayor’s Office have primary responsibility for developing Houston’s five year Capitol Improvement Plan (CIP) for infrastructure improvements from street construction and reconstruction to water, sewer and drainage projects to Parks and Libraries. There are also separate Parks and Library Master Plans for Houston.

The City’s Planning Department has primary responsibility for Houston’s Major Thoroughfare Plan.

In addition to the city, METRO, the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT), Harris County Commissioners and the Harris County Toll Road Authority all do transportation and infrastructure

construction in Houston. There are also private sector residential, commercial and industrial construction and development plans, but no true coordination between the public and private sectors.

### **An Entrepreneurial City**

Houston is an Entrepreneurial City. Entrepreneurialism however is how you get things done; it is not a vision of what should be done. To be successful, entrepreneurs know that they must plan for what they want to achieve before they enter the marketplace. The free enterprise system is the “sea” upon which entrepreneurs sail guided by the vision of what they have planned to achieve as their North Star.

Entrepreneurs also know that although they have a plan, they must remain vigilant and flexible in order to adjust their plans to changing circumstances.

### **A Solution: Reviving “the Houston Planning Approach”**

In 1968, the Houston City Planning Commission issued a report titled “Houston Preliminary General Study Plan for 1990.”

In 1972, the “plan” was revised and reissued as “Houston General Study Plan for 1990.” Eight years later (1980) the Planning Department updated the study. (Houston Year 2000 Report & Maps.)

In his transmittal letter for the Year 2000 Report, C. Jim Stewart, then Chairman of the City Planning Commission wrote:

[R]apid population increases and continuing economic growth have rendered it necessary to maintain the long range outlook at 20 years.

Houston has few centralized planning mechanism, thus relying heavily on a horizontal planning approach. This 20 year study, therefore, is a synthesis of individual plans, development announcements, and projections. It emphasizes the growth patterns and not the control aspect of future land use. As with the Study Plan for 1990, the value of this 20 year study is in its comprehensiveness. It provides a basis for which decisions can be made. (Houston Year 2000 Report, pg. VII.)

The Preface to the 1980 report states:

In addition to presenting facts, figures, and projections, it [the Year 2000 Report] describes what could be called “the Houston Planning Approach.” In contrast to centralized planning, revolving around a zoning map, this process is horizontal in nature, with various agencies developing plans after coordinating with their appropriate counterparts.

... [W]hile planning concepts are used to show certain desirable features that could be affected by public policy.

I believe these documents will provide useful information to those who take interest in Houston as residents, professionals, developers, or any individual whose decisions contribute to the future of Houston. (Houston Year 2000 Report, pg. V.)

It is time to revive “the Houston Planning Approach” and use GIS 3D Visualization technology to make it more effective and useful to “residents, professionals, developers, or any individuals whose decisions contribute to the future of Houston.”

GIS visualization technology should be used to show the holistic impact on Houston if all existing public and known private sector plans were implemented as they are currently written. Houstonians could, and should, also use the technology to visualize the impact of existing plans on rainwater runoff and flooding patterns in regional watersheds.

If all the public infrastructure and transportation plans now on the drawing board were implemented, would they help make Houston a better place to live, work, worship and raise a family during the next five to ten years? We would be in a better position to answer that question if we could see today what implementing all those plans would make Houston look like during the next five to ten years; how they would impact flooding, traffic patterns and congestion and where new housing and commercial and industrial development would likely be located.

We could see the future if we put all the plans we currently know about into a GIS 3D Visualization database.

Once the public could see what is likely to come, then Houstonians could decide if that is the future we want for our city.

If Houstonians could “see” the results of all the current plans that we actually know about, then more meaningful public and private sector decisions could be made about what we all really want for the future of Houston and our families.

# # #

\* Assistant Professor, Texas Southern University’s Barbara Jordan-Mickey Leland School of Public Affairs. Professor Robinson can be contacted at [robinson\\_cg@tsu.edu](mailto:robinson_cg@tsu.edu).

